

General Education: Curricular and Pedagogical Issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of general education from the curriculum and the pedagogical perspectives. It describes the philosophy of the National University of Malaysia (UKM), and the place of general education in the context of UKM's philosophy. It also describes the state of practice of general education at UKM as perceived by students and lecturers involved in learning and teaching some courses in general studies. The paper then highlights some curricular and pedagogical issues, including the concept and objectives of general education, lecturers preparation, suitability of courses offered, students' participation, teaching methods and assessments. Although this paper raises more questions than answers, an attempt is made to suggest how some of the issues could be resolved.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of general or liberal education is not new to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). It is embedded in the philosophy which underlines the foundation of the university. Among others, the objective of UKM is to provide an education which would enable its graduates to attain a balanced view of the society and the world they live in. UKM graduates should acknowledge the omnipotence of God, be grateful to him and apply with wisdom the knowledge gained for the betterment of society. To be able to do this, students should not only be trained for certain vocation, more important they require an education that would develop their maturity, rationality, an appreciation of culture and the aesthetics. The Philosophy specifically states:

The combination of Faith in Allah and beneficial knowledge and the integration between theory and practice is the basis for the advancement of knowledge, the educated society and the growth and development of the university. (UKM 1996/97)

As the university matures and prepares to meet the challenges of the new century, general education continues to be emphasised. The Vice Chancellor for example, in his annual lecture series places general or liberal education as a priority agenda. The Centre for General Studies, in its **Prospectus** (1997/98) clearly outlines the broad objectives of liberal education, the types of courses categorized as general education and the scope covered by the courses. All students are required to accumulate a minimum of 20 units of liberal education before they could graduate.

Despite the acknowledgement and official status accorded, general education faces some problems and setbacks. This paper addresses some of the problems and issues which originate from, and are related to, the curriculum and the pedagogical practices. Aspects covered include the planning and the design of courses categorised as general education, teaching methods or approaches used or not used, the relevance of course offerings to future needs, and course evaluation.

Teaching and learning, especially at the higher level, have always been a private affair in the sense that it is very much an activity indulged in by individuals and his students in the privacy of the lecture halls or classrooms. There is not much public

discussion or exchange of views because teaching and learning is subjective and no teaching situations are alike. Because of that, this paper does not provide an indepth or a detailed picture, rather it is an overview of the situation, as perceived by the authors. An attempt to validate some of the perceptions is made through a small study on lecturers and students involved with the teaching and learning of general education. Other than that, our comments and generalizations are based on an analysis of documents and selected books available about the subject, as well as on our own experience as lecturers at the Faculty of Education, UKM.

CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

The term **curriculum** is defined here to mean all types of organized learning experiences provided by the university for its students. It encompasses the formal programmes and courses, which contain cognitive, affective and manipulative skill elements. We also regard co-curricular activities and the hidden messages underpinning courses, activities, or projects as components of the curriculum. Our definition therefore is broad and emphasises not just the formal component but also the underlying informal element.

Our definition of **pedagogy** is that which is related to the profession of teaching. It encompasses both the process of teaching and the planning and preparation that goes with it. **Teaching** is the direct transmission of the curriculum. It is defined here as a process that motivates and causes learning among students. We view teaching and learning in higher education as more than acquiring information or knowledge, skills or attitudes relevant for a certain vocation in life. Teaching and learning is also regarded as a process of creating and using the opportunities to help individuals attain personal and social values which should be used to enable him or her adjust or fit in with his world of work and the society around him. The effectiveness of teaching depend on many factors including the lecturer, the students, the subject matter, the methods of delivery and the environment where learning takes place. It involves the lecturer's understanding of the learning theories and its application in the classrooms, the students abilities and their background and personality.

THE IDEAL PERSPECTIVE: OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF GENERAL EDUCATION

One of the main features of general education is that it is difficult to operationalize the concept because it touches or describes an idealistic point of view (Paul Dressel 1980). The interpretation of general education is also subjective depending upon the philosophy and the orientation of the lecturers and the institution where the courses are taught. It is also difficult to assess because the outcomes of general education is not immediate or overt. General education, among others encompasses personal, social and religious values and the effectiveness of certain taught subjects in the education processes. The impact of general education is best known by the individuals who experience the learning, outside assessment provides only a superficial and incomplete picture of the impact of general education.

Despite the fact, to enable us to make comparisons and generalisations, we describe below some ideals and values identified as desirable for students at UKM for whom general education is regarded as important. The philosophy indicates that for a person to function efficiently in the society he requires some intellectual skills, which includes: (1) understanding and appreciating the philosophy of education based on certain idealistic values and Malaysian history (2) the ability to think critically and creatively, and to communicate effectively (3) the skills to acquire knowledge from a broad perspective. To meet these goals, courses are structured so that it is possible for all students to take the courses from each of the following categories:

1. Values and history
2. Quantitative and communication skills
3. Other academic courses to broaden knowledge

The courses are offered by the Center for General Studies and other faculties. Specifically, the Center offers Islamic Civilization and Nationhood (ZT 1012 and 1022) which are compulsory for all students and a list of elective courses such as co-curriculum and English. Students are required to take a minimum of 20 units and grades attained in these courses are counted in the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). Because there are also courses in the various faculties offered as electives for general education, lecturers from faculties are therefore involved directly in general education.

THE ACTUAL PRACTICE: A SURVEY

To see the actual practice of liberal or general education, students' perception on general education was obtained through a simple survey conducted in May 1997. Students' feedback is important; as receivers of the teaching process they are in a position to reflect to what extent the course objectives have been achieved.

THE SAMPLES

Respondents of the survey were Diploma of Education students who registered for courses in the 1997/98 session. The students had previously majored in various disciplines, categorised broadly as the sciences and the social sciences and humanities. The majority, however, were from the Social Sciences and Humanities. Four hundred (400) questionnaires were distributed and 40% were returned. The questionnaire contained questions related to pedagogical and the curriculum. Respondents were also asked to state their opinions on general education in general. Examples of the questions include:

1. What subject(s) did you take?
2. How was/were it/they taught?
3. What benefit did you obtain?
4. How could the teaching be improved?
5. Are there other subjects that you would like to take?
6. What is your opinion about general education?

THE FINDINGS

TYPES OF COURSES TAKEN BY STUDENTS

Courses taken by students included Languages (Vietnam, Thai, English, Malay, Chinese, Myanmar and Arabic), the Social Sciences (the History of Modern Western and Islamic culture, Political Science, Business Administration, Economics, Marketing, Insurance, Interpersonal Skills, Comparative Religion, Man and Society, Islamic laws, Islamic family laws, the History of Thoughts, Comparative Ethics, Tourism Studies, Thinking skills, Education and Society, Human Resource Management, Population Geography) and a Course on Translation, the Natural and Biological Science, Physical Education, and Co-curricular activities such as OPKIM and Palapes (military training).

The above list shows that there are enough courses offered at UKM and that there are plenty of choices for students to make. However, are the choices enough? Many of the respondents felt that more courses should be offered. Some indicated that they should be given the real freedom to choose because although there are many courses listed in the UKM catalogue, not all are offered. Restrictions such as class quotas should be informed to them. Three lecturers were asked about the general education courses they have taught. Their limitation was time and energy. In physical education which is a popular course, the lecturer who also taught Physical Education to students in the Faculty of Education had enough of his own departmental work load and could only offer limited places to students from outside the Faculty. A lecturer of another course also mentioned the same limitation while a third lecturer could not offer her course due to time constraints, she gave preference to Diploma and other students from her faculty.

DO STUDENTS LIKE GENERAL EDUCATION?

A great majority of the students surveyed were in favour of general education courses because they received new knowledge and understanding of things from these courses. The knowledge could be used to deepen their grasp of their fields of specialisation and to create an awareness of other courses in various disciplines offered in the university. These findings indicate that the objective toward making students life-long learners is achievable.

HAS THE TEACHING BEEN INTERESTING?

While there was a positive response to general education, a majority of the students felt that the method of teaching needed to be improved. They felt that in teaching Islamic Civilization and Nationhood lectures should be supplemented by group discussions, visits to places of interest related to the course content. The lectures also needed to be made more interesting. A non-Moslem mentioned that the course on Islamic Civilization she took was interesting because of the personality of the lecturer. He was considered open minded and allowed students to express their opinions and to discuss issues raised in the lecture. The lecturer was also able to relate Islam with other religions. The student said that she had learnt much about Islam which she never knew before and realized how closely related it was to Christianity. Other students mentioned that it was too big a class

(400) and the mode of teaching was confined to only lectures. Many respondents expressed the need for active learning, involving them as learners and the need for them to express their opinions.

STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

According to one lecturer who had been involved in teaching general studies courses for the past few years, some students expressed the feelings that they were forced to take it. However when their grades for the past session was analysed, it seemed a majority performed quite well where their grades ranged from B, B- and C+. Most of these students were non- Moslems. From the writer's own experience in teaching non-Moslems, students acquired a reasonable knowledge about Islam, from these courses. However it is felt that the rationale for the courses should be well explained and modes of delivery should be varied and interesting towards facilitating active learning on their part. The fact that prior to 1994 the grades of the two compulsory subjects were not considered in computing students' Cumulative Grade Point average (CGPA) also led to the courses being positively received. Students were not put under much stress then.

A majority of the students surveyed considered the amount of time allocated for general education courses to be sufficient. Teaching could be improved, through such measures like being clear and concise in their delivery, using teaching aids to facilitate understanding, and using a variety of techniques other than just the lecture method. Students were of the opinion that co-curricular activities, physical education and other skill-related courses were conducted satisfactorily.

CURRICULAR AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

On the basis of the above account, where the ideals desired and the perceptions of actual practice of teaching and learning is described, it is now possible to make generalizations of some issues and problems pertaining to general education at UKM. Our generalizations are also supported by our personal observation and experience as lecturers in the field of education as well as facilitators in the workshop on teaching for academics at UKM for a number of years.

Perhaps these issues arise because generally speaking, there is still a vague understanding of the concept of general education, its status and functions and the specific objectives or outcomes desired from the courses. Problems also arise because, lecturers are generally not fully aware of non-traditional methods of teaching which could serve as alternatives to the lecture technique that they are familiar with. Although staff development courses are held, most teaching staff learn to teach on the job.

DEFINITION AND CONCEPT OF GENERAL EDUCATION

The meaning of general education in the context of higher education is one of the main issues which can create problem. What is actually **general education**? How do we measure the outcomes? How do we know students have been induced with values or have been socialised to absorb certain desirable traits or behaviour? These are questions which require clear and unambiguous answers.

Although the definition of general education has been clearly laid out, this is not so evident in the case of specific discipline-related courses listed outside the catalogue of department courses which could be taken by students. At UKM general education is both prescribed and free in the sense that students are allowed to choose which subjects to take. This is in line with the categorisation of general education that is to contain:

- i. courses related to religion, values, citizenship and history
- ii. courses related to quantitative and communicative skills and
- iii. courses outside students' specializations, meant to widen their knowledge.

While courses related to values, quantitative and communicative **skills** have their objectives clearly stated, in line with the broad ideals, courses of specialisation place emphasis on learning objectives which are specific and related to certain disciplines only. Unless lecturers teaching these courses are aware of the participation of non-major students and the need to provide the general education perspective, then the specific needs of the students may not be met. Surely the ultimate objective of learning is also to enable students to assimilate knowledge and apply what they have learned and not just the accumulation of facts. Equally important, it is also to familiarise them with the structures of certain disciplines to assist them to look at events, current problems and issues from a new perspective. In other words, ideally general education should begin to provide students with an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the social, cultural and physical world in which they live. Unless this objective is understood, then general education is no different from the other specialised subjects to be taken to qualify candidates for certain professions.

THE OBJECTIVES OF TEACHING GENERAL EDUCATION

Statements of objectives and the scope of topics to be covered do not make general education. All courses listed as general education have many objectives but ultimately it is to bring about changes in students' behaviour and attitudes. As such, courses have to be operationalised or translated into specific behaviour and value outcomes. These are many, and examples may include:

- i. to acquire knowledge of the cultural heritage such as the understanding of great literary, scientific and artistic work of man,
- ii. to understand and appreciate the major events in one's own history and culture.
- iii. to understand knowledge about and to appreciate the behaviour of individuals and groups **as** well as values and cultures in society, both current and **past**,
- iv. to use new perspectives including modes of inquiry that are used in other disciplines to understand today's happenings
- v. to develop one's potential to the maximum
- vi. to communicate effectively.

On the basis of the numerous outcomes desired, many questions could therefore be raised in respect of the courses at UKM. Are the objectives of courses categorised as general education clearly outlined in terms of behavioural objectives? If so, are all

aspects of behaviour, cognitive, affective and skills given equal emphasis when the courses are taught?

From our observation, lecturers even in subjects which are value and literary oriented have a tendency to place emphasis on the cognitive aspect that is, on knowledge and understanding, and not so much on the affective and the skills elements. Also, courses are more teacher-centred than learner-centred. Most classes are also classroom based and very few are based on the community or work place. Unless this is realised and steps are taken to analyse and outline the specific objectives before teaching then general education will remain in theory only. Its impact, most likely will become superficial and vague.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The way courses for general education is planned, selected and taught also raise many questions. At UKM, usually the task of curriculum development is left to the responsibility of the lecturers. Individually lecturers and tutors have almost complete autonomy to plan and choose the content or topics, instructional methods and materials for teaching. Planning usually begins by identifying who is likely to take the course, when, where and how many credits should be given. The teaching is then planned according to the content or topics to be covered. This method of focusing on course content is not as suitable as the learner-centred approach. Under the learner-centred approach the focus is on the students first and how the subjects are related to their lives and how they bring meaning to everyday interaction and activity. In short, lecturers tailor their teaching to the learners' needs, and the changes expected of them as a result of the teaching and learning process. Have this factor been considered at UKM? Who decides which courses are suitable as general education courses, the lecturers or students? Or both? It is also a fact that when lecturers teach, there are differences in the interpretation and translation of facts depending on their beliefs and training. How then do we ascertain that students develop a common understanding of the topics taught, for example of the culture and heritage desired in the syllabus?

These are some thorny issues which need to be carefully thought out and resolved. Planning and coordination among lecturers teaching the subjects need to be given priority consideration.

STYLES AND TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING GENERAL EDUCATION

If we take general education to mean courses of study that assist the individuals to develop critical thinking and communicative skills, then the question of styles of teaching matters a great deal. Teaching objectives should be to help students develop inquiry and analytical skills and to become more critically aware of the world around them. Teaching should increase their feelings of independence and confidence. Judging from the criticisms raised about local university students, UKM included, such as the criticism that students do not have opinions, they prefer to accept than to enquire, they dare not challenge other views etc (see for example article **Learners and not thinkers** by Lee Wei Foong, NST, June 7, 1997. p. 6), questions about suitability of techniques

and styles of teaching used are therefore appropriate to be raised Other than the lecture method and small group instruction through tutorial and seminar, team teaching, cooperative learning, simulations and role playing, case study method, and many others are alternatives to be considered. Lecturers should be prepared to use them in the classrooms.

Lecturers also seldom give much attention to the so called co-curricular activities which are provided independently of academic programs. Yet, activities conducted at the student halls of residence (kamsis), mosques, as well as the various student associations, provide opportunities and experiences for materialising the true meaning of general education. Both types, academic courses and co-curricular activities, should be regarded as complementary and mutually beneficial. We could integrate the teaching of some courses categorised as general education with responsibility and experiences undertaken at the Kamsis, and other outside class activities.

ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The final issue revolves around the range of courses offered. There are two broad cultural dimensions of general education, the humanities and the sciences. We have courses on languages, literature, philosophy, history, law and legal issues, ethics, etc on one hand and the sciences on the other. Given the cafeteria style of course offering, how can we ensure that students specialising in the sciences take courses in the humanities (other than Islamic Civilization and Nationhood) and vice-versa? Are the subjects listed enough and suitable for future living? What about subjects in the field of medicine, psychology, ethics, or legislation, are they available to all students? Does the curriculum represent an orientation towards understanding the future as well as the past? Are the courses futuristic in nature? We have been reminded ever so often that narrow educational goals can lead to training students who are not prepared to meet the challenges of a changing society.

CONCLUSION

This paper has given an overview of general education at UKM with emphasis on the curricular and pedagogical issues from the perspective of the writers who have served UKM for many years. The views are also based on the available literature and from a simple survey of students who had followed courses at UKM. The issues highlighted include those relating to the lecturers and their awareness of students who follow their courses, teaching methods and the suitability of the courses. All in all, the philosophy of general education at UKM is in line with the philosophy of the University and Islamic viewpoints. What needs to be done however is to conduct an in depth study to acquire data that would help in the planning and monitoring of the courses in future. Seminars, discussions, dialogues within departments as well as between departments would bring awareness of problems and ways to solve them. Students' views about the courses must not be ignored for they are the recipients of the educational process and as such are capable of providing feedback about the curriculum and pedagogical issues.

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